23. *Calvin Jones and Mitchell Caton: Builders of the Cultural Present. 1981. Chicago.*

1 Beginnings

No one asked for the "Wall of Respect." It just had to be painted. It made a direct statement to the Black community and the statement came directly out of the community through its artists.

—Harold Haydon, *Chicago Sun-Times*,
December 13, 1970.

In early spring 1967, a group of some twenty black artists started painting on a semiabandoned two-story building on the southeast corner of Forty-third and Langley streets. It was in the center of Chicago's old "black belt" South Side, an area scheduled for demolition to make way for urban renewal. The project began without fanfare, unnoticed by the press; but it gathered around it a festival of the arts for black people. Photographs were added to the paintings and poems inscribed among the portraits. Musicians came to play jazz sets, poets to read poems. Uncommissioned, without patronage or manifestos, it was a self-determined effort of community-conscious artists. The *Wall of Respect* was the beginning (pl. 1).

Most of the participating artists were members of the Organization for Black American Culture, or OBAC (pronounced *obasi*, the Yoruba word for chieftain). At that time, OBAC included not only painters, but writers, poets, actors, playwrights, and others, orga-

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nized into three workshops: literary, visual arts, and community. OBAC's statement of purposes was definitive: "We want to provide a new context for the Black Artist in which he can work out his problems and pursue his aims unhampered and uninhibited by the prejudices and dictates of the 'mainstream.'"1 The artists found a "new context" in the community itself, which soon claimed the *Wall of Respect* as its own.

Some sections of the *Wall of Respect* were painted directly on the brick, others on panels. Few of the artists had done exterior artwork before, and much of their work peeled badly after a year or two. Some sections simply grouped rows of portraits and photos, whereas others were filled with fully developed compositions. To facilitate the work, figures were grouped by fields of accomplishment: statesmanship, athletics, music, literature, religion, etc. Silvia Abernathy divided up the wall, laying it out in formal rectangular areas corresponding to the natural rhythmic divisions in the wall determined by doors, moldings, boarded-up windows, and window bays. Mirna Weaver painted the sports section, Eliot Hunter and Jeff Donaldson the jazz section. Edward Christmas and another artist painted the literature section, including the poem "Calling All Black People" by LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka). William Walker, assigned with other artists to the religious-leaders section, which was to include Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Nat Turner, etc., painted a march led by Elijah Muhammed, called "The Messenger." Carolyn Lawrence painted the adjacent newsstand with silhouette dance figures. Other artists involved included Roy Lewis, Norman Perris, Wadsworth Jarrel, Wyatt T. Walker, Will Hancock, Florence Hawkins, Barbara Jones, and Darryl Colror. Billy Abernathy, Jr., and Bobby Sengestacke contributed photographs. Curly Elison, a sign painter, did the lettering, and Lenore Franklin, a community activist, assisted the artists.

It was not exactly a mural, nor was it simply a gallery in the streets. Its purpose was not to bring aesthetic enlightenment to an area too poor to support even a nominal art fair, but to use art

1 "Wall of Respect," *Ebony* (December 1967): 49.

publicly to express the experience of a people. It was a collective act, an event.

The wall proclaimed that black people have the right to define black culture and black history for themselves, to name their own heroes. In the words of Bill Walker, "the main idea was to come forth with the spirit of giving unselfishly." Painting about black heroes was "to overshadow the worst examples having to do with human entrapment. We had a responsibility to make an impression on the little ones. The artists had no concern with winning the approval of the establishment or attracting notice from the establishment—which would have contradicted what they were about."2

The *Wall of Respect* embodied a unique moment—the moment when a large group of black artists in different media could collaborate publicly in direct contact with the community on the basis of being black. Distinctions between poster and easel painting, poems and photos, were submerged in the sense of the absolute necessity of public communication of black pride, accomplishment, and self-respect. "This Wall was created to Honor our Black Heroes, and to Beautify our Community," the wall's inscription stated. Political lines between various shades of nationalism—between mysticism, reform, or revolution—were blurred or had not yet been drawn. The *Wall of Respect* coincided with the year that James Foreman called "the high-tide of Black resistance." The action of the masses seemed to be running ahead of the ideologies and tactics of any and all leaders.

Like anything else that evolves in time, the wall's character was altered and molded by the pressure of events. As the summer progressed, the community responded, insisting on impressing their own stamp on the work. Many opposed the inclusion of Dr. King, demanding Stokely Carmichael instead. Walker, Weaver, Franklin, and others continued working on the wall. Eugene Eda joined the group and painted a giant fist, flanked by portraits of Malcolm X, Stokely, and H. Rap Brown. The fist initiated a change from por-

2 William Walker, interview with Eva Cockcroft, 1975.

traits to statements about conditions in the community, a shift of direction that was fundamental to later developments. Walker painted over "The Messenger" with a composition entitled "See, Listen, and Learn," which showed Nat Turner preaching to a dense crowd of people.

The police watched the activity around the wall with suspicion. The artists were threatened, and there were anonymous attempts to bribe local gangs to deface the wall. The street gangs, however, supported the project. The street, which earlier had been the scene of a shoot-out, became neutral ground for the rival P. Stones and Disciples. The Main 21, leaders of the Almighty P. Stone Nation, met with the artists and offered to help secure materials. Congressman Ralph Metcalfe promised to ensure noninterference by the police.

In August, local civil-rights leaders called for a mass demonstration on Forty-third Street near the wall. A street permit was denied, but on a hot afternoon, angry people filled the streets from every direction. Police with shotguns waited on the rooftops. In the midst of this sea of protesters, Curly Elison, with permission from the demonstration leaders, calmly lettered *Wall of Respect* under the figure of Muhammed Ali. Walker held the ladder and passed up the paint. He remembers it was "an hour of high tension—the air was so thick, so heavy."[3]

The wall was dedicated later that month, on August 27. The street was again filled with people; but this time the atmosphere was festive, and vibrant with music. Gwendolyn Brooks and Don L. Lee read poems dedicated to the wall and Val Ward, founder of the Kuumba Theatre Workshop, recited. Historian Lerone Bennett declared, "The Wall is home and a way Home."[4]

The wall rapidly became an undeclared landmark. Its fame spread by word of mouth. For a quarter, children would offer to explain "our" wall to the growing number of visitors, naming each portrait and symbol. Johnny Ray, the "chairman" of the wall, would

3 *Ibid.*
4 "Wall of Respect," *Ebony* (December 1967): 49.

come out of his television-repair shop, the last operating business on the block, to talk about it. Walker especially remembers one young man who, after studying the wall for a long time, said simply, "I'm gaining my strength."

The significance of this historic beginning was fully recognized by at least one of the participating artists. William Walker, who had obtained permission from the owner to paint on the wall, originally proposed the idea of the *Wall of Respect* to its sponsors, OBAC and the Forty-third Street Community Organization. Walker later recalled how for fifteen years, while working as a sign painter and decorator, he had been waiting for a rebirth of public art, for a chance to address his people directly in paint. Raised in Birmingham, Alabama, Walker had done his military service in the Air Force and then had enrolled in the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, where he studied under Emerson Burckhart, Joseph Kanzani, Samella Lewis, and Edmund Kuehn. His first painting projects had been in Memphis and Nashville, Tennessee. "It was in Memphis," Walker recalled, "that I first became aware of the fact that Black people had no appreciation for art or artists—they were too busy just struggling to survive. . . . In questioning myself as to how I could best give my art to Black people, I came to the realization that art must belong to ALL people—that is when I first began to think of public art."[5]

Later, Walker was recognized by many of us as the founder of the mural movement, not only because of his role in the *Wall of Respect*, but also because his commitment to public art went far beyond the event in which the wall was born and beyond the historical period that it embodied. Throughout the difficult early years, Walker persevered. The force of his personal example and clear vision of the importance of public art helped draw other artists into the movement. For many, he was the teacher.

The significance of the *Wall of Respect* extended beyond Chicago. In 1968, the *East Side Voice* invited Walker, Eda, Hunter, and Christmas to Detroit. There they executed the *Wall of Dignity* on
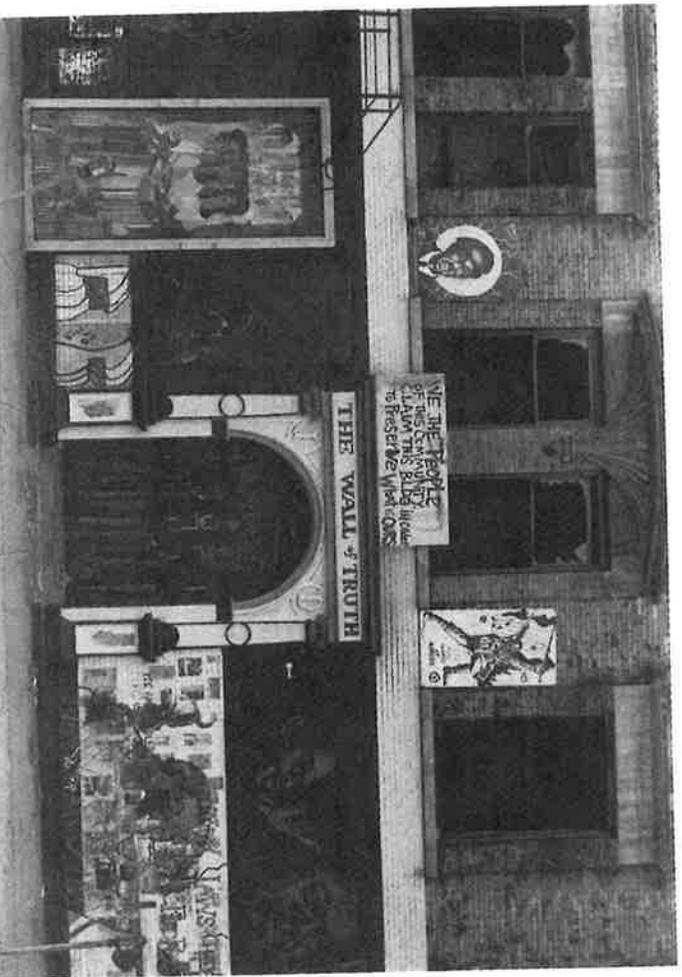
5 From *The Artists' Statement*, Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, 1971.
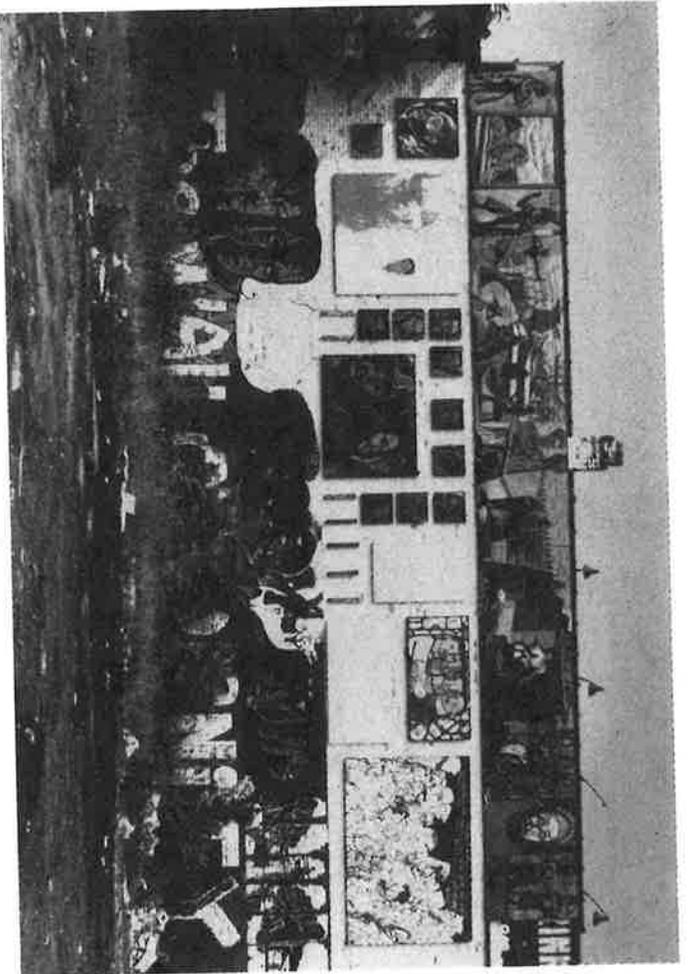
1. *William Walker, Eugene Eda, Eliot Hunter, and Edward Christmas: Wall of Dignity. 1968. Detroit.*

2. *William Walker, Eugene Eda, and others: Wall of Truth. 1969. Chicago.*

Mack Avenue, a few blocks from the Chrysler plant, and worked with several Detroit artists on the Grace Episcopal Church on Twelfth Street, close to the burned-out area that had been the center of the recent riots. In December 1968, at the invitation of Rev. Thomas Kerwin of Saint Bernard's Church (across the street from the *Wall of Dignity*), Eda and Walker began work on masonite panels for the front of the church. After completing this *Harriet Tubman Memorial Wall*, they returned to Chicago.

In 1969, Walker and Eda renewed the *Wall of Respect*, covering the fist and portraits of Stokely and Rap Brown with panels that dramatized police repression, and replacing "See, Listen, and Learn" with the composition "Peace and Salvation." Then, across the street, on the boarded-up doorways of a burned-out tenement, they began the *Wall of Truth*. Again, panels were combined with sections of direct painting, but this time almost all of the sections were related to the themes of oppression, unity, and confrontation. In one section Walker combined collaged real posters with painting. Over the title a panel was hung with the following inscription:

We the People
Of this community
Claim this building in order
To preserve what is ours.

The walls had become a visible rallying point for the community.

The more famous the walls became, the more they were an embarrassment and obstacle to the city administration, which found its urban-renewal plans for clearing the area now frustrated by the presence of the paintings and the community's pride in "its" walls. At least twice in 1969 and 1970 mass rallies at the walls forced the city to delay scheduled demolition. A counterplan was put forward: that the buildings be rehabilitated and given to the community for an art center. The city insisted the structures were unsafe but promised an art center after demolition. Urban renewal was stalemated.

The people refused to abandon the walls, and the artists continued to work on them, creating new panels, which spread around the

corner. Eventually, it was hard to tell just where the *Wall of Truth* ended. It was on a street that already had various hand-painted signs, including a Christ carrying the cross on a storefront church, and a group of musicians gracing the front of Pepper's Hall of Greats, a well-known blues club.

Photos of the *Wall of Respect* graced the cover and inside pages of the Summer–Fall 1968 issue of *Arts in Society*, an issue devoted to "the Arts and the Black Revolution." *Ebony* magazine ran a feature article on the wall in December 1967. The wall captured the imagination of artists in other cities. In 1968 similar walls were painted in black communities in Boston, Saint Louis, and Philadelphia. Wall of Respect became a generic term for these new black murals. Dana Chandler, one of the original Boston muralists, recalls: "We wanted to do some Walls of Respect in the black community like the one that was done in Chicago. The difference was that, unlike the wall in Chicago, where, as I remember, the money did not come from the city, but people got together and raised the money to put it up, we did go to the city and ask them for money."[6]

As the idea of outdoor murals spread throughout the nation, the first wall was remembered. In 1973, when Caryl Yasko (a white artist) met with local gang members to discuss a mural for Forty-seventh Street on Chicago's South Side, the reaction was: "Wow! Now we'll have our own Wall of Respect, and nothing will ever happen to it."

I think that that wall in Chicago was the pivotal wall for influencing the erection of Walls of Respect around the country—they started it for everybody, blacks, whites, Puerto Ricans, everybody. . . .[7]

In a sense, the news of the wall was like a single spark setting off a prairie fire. By 1970, Chicano, white, and Asian artists were directing mural projects in at least a dozen major cities and a number of smaller towns. The year 1970 may be taken as marking the time when inner-city wall painting emerged from isolated events and

[6] Dana Chandler, interview with Eva Cockcroft, 1974.
[7] *Ibid.*
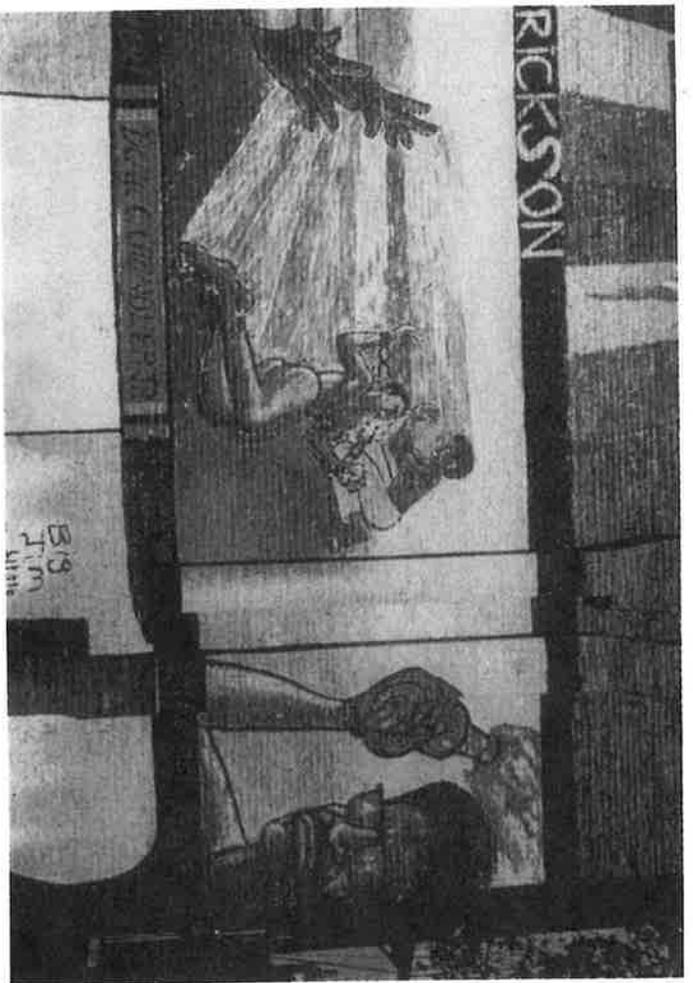
3. *Gary A. Rickson: Segregation, A.D., and Dana C. Chandler, Jr. (Akin Duro): Stokely and Rap: Freedom and Self-Defense. 1968. Boston.*

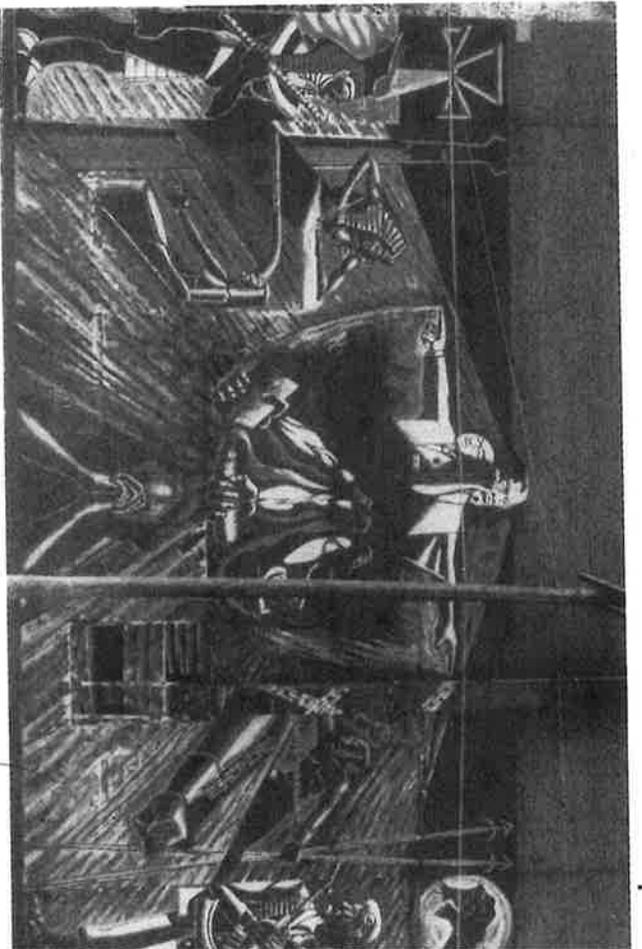4. *Mario Castillo and neighborhood youths: Metafísica. 1968. Chicago.*

individual gestures to become a conscious multinational movement of artists who now began to call themselves muralists.

Once again, the events that marked the transition occurred in Chicago. The year 1970 was one of tremendous growth for mural painting in Chicago and other cities. Some thirty murals, directed by black, white, Chicano, and Asian artists, were painted in Chicago alone; even more were painted in Boston (pl. 2). Federal, state, and local grants made it possible for muralists to work on a much larger scale. It was also in 1970 that the mural movement's first manifesto was written: *The Artists' Statement*, by William Walker, Eugene Eda, John Weber, and Mark Rogovin. The occasion for the manifesto was the "Murals for the People" exhibition at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, February–March 1971.

Because of the museum exhibition, efforts to preserve the first walls were revived, and alternative plans were discussed. The artists pledged to contribute new panels to the Walls of Respect and Truth in order to revive interest in them, many of the original artists having moved away. In early 1971, when Walker, Eda, Weber, and Rogovin were just beginning on their panels in the museum's basement, the women's board of the museum toured the *Wall of Respect* and the *Wall of Truth*. It was the ultimate recognition by white respectability. If the artists thought, however, that this bit of slum tourism might help ensure the preservation of the walls, they were soon disabused. Less than a month later, while they were still working in the museum, a fire "of unknown origin" was set in the rear of Johnny Ray's shop, and it spread to the entire building. The fire destroyed most of the paintings, although people did manage to remove some of the panels. Once the wall was dismantled, the city proceeded with demolition of the remaining buildings in the area, four years behind schedule. The few remaining panel sections, mostly from the *Wall of Truth*, were eventually installed under Eda's supervision outside of Malcolm X College on the near West Side.

The *Wall of Respect* was gone, but the movement it had sparked was very much alive. This movement has several elements relatively new to art in America. These new elements include:

5. *Eugene Eda:* Wall of Meditation. *1970. Chicago.*

- the locations, outdoors and in "neglected sites," in working-class and minority neighborhoods, rather than inside government buildings.

- the initiative of artists. Groups of artists rather than politicians or professional administrators continue to administer several of the mural programs.

- the leading role of black artists and in general of artists belonging to oppressed groups traditionally excluded from the established art world (blacks, Chicanos, other Latins, Asians, and women).

- community support and involvement (financial sponsorship, discussion of theme, practical support, inaugural celebrations, and people's protection of the murals). The first walls in Chicago, Santa Fe, Detroit, etc., were entirely sponsored by the local community. Although subsequently government did get involved in sponsoring some murals through municipal departments of cultural affairs, state arts councils, and especially through the Na-

tional Endowment for the Arts, official funding was never more than partial, usually on a "matching" basis. Involvement of the local community base continues to give the murals a distinctive character and role.

• a collective character. The murals are often executed by groups of artists or are designed and executed by nonprofessional local residents led by an artist.

Naturally, these elements are not completely new. They occurred *episodically* in the work of the WPA and the Mexican mural movement. But they *characterize* the contemporary mural movement.

2 Historical Background

Our murals will continue to speak of the liberation struggles of Black and Third World peoples; they will record history, speak of today, and project toward the future. They will speak of an end to war, racism, and repression; of love, of beauty, of life. We want to restore an image of full humanity to the people, to place art into its true context–into life.

—William Walker, Eugene Eda, John Weber, and Mark Rogovin, *The Artists' Statement.*

Sociopolitical Context

Starting with the civil-rights movement, waves of protest and grass-roots organizing spread across the nation, engulfing more and more sections of the population in self-examination, conflict, and struggle. The Indochina War, the crisis of the cities, and a growing alienation from traditional American values came to constitute the critical issues of the 1960s. There simultaneously occurred a wide range of local organizing activities that shared a general thrust toward attempting a positive grass-roots reconstruction of society. The early murals were strongly related to these national issues and to the efforts of community and neighborhood organizations. The overarching context of these movements for social change

was the gradual decline of imperialism, most starkly represented in the controversial engulfment in Vietnam and the neglect of the cities. The costs of imperialism ran high: fifty thousand young Americans killed in Indochina, $140 billion for a war with no end in sight, inflation at home, decline of the dollar abroad, and immeasurable "social costs" from widespread alienation and disillusionment with the ideology of "melting pot" America.

During and after World War II, millions of blacks from the South had poured into the northern and western cities seeking employment in the booming arms plants, automotive and steel industries, and other centers of industrial production. Contrary to popular myth, from 1960 to 1966 this black migration to the big cities did not slacken. Overcrowding in rat-infested tenements represented a serious threat to life and health. Urban schooling, housing, medical care, and other services deteriorated. But instead of reform, there occurred corporate disinvestment from many urban industrial areas. Assembly plants moved to the suburbs, and available city jobs declined, particularly for youth. The urban landscape became increasingly marked by poverty, racial tension, drug addiction, and revolt. The costs of the Vietnam war were draining monies and energies away from much-needed social services in the cities.

In their alarm at these crises, society's ruling circles became sharply divided over the relative merits of reform or repression, and rival cliques contended for power. (This contention was reflected in the disarray of the Democratic Party in 1968 and in the internecine struggles leading up to Watergate.) The National Advisory Report on Civil Disorder of 1968 bluntly told Americans that social unrest would continue to increase unless actions were taken to remedy the underlying causes of the problem. The report recommended not only a centralization and strengthening of police forces, but also a number of positive-action programs. By 1968, money began to flow in unprecedented sums into the inner cities for "cool-out" programs of various kinds. Innumerable public-funding programs were established, building on earlier pilot projects and ranging from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to Head Start. Some of these were short-lived and poorly planned.

Residents of urban slum communities themselves helped develop community organizing and self-help programs aimed toward positive goals. This nonfunded community organizing was led by a wide range of political organizations, such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Rent Strike, and the Black Panther Party; student organizations, such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS); and politicized youth organizations, such as the Puerto Ricans' Young Lords, the southern white migrants' Young Patriots, and the Chicanos' La Raza and Brown Berets. Social clubs, ethnic-studies departments in colleges, clinics, food co-ops, welfare-rights unions, tenants' organizations, youth centers, and various storefront operations were established. These and similar groups began to develop cultural, economic, and political programs within their own communities. (Churches, block clubs, and neighborhood organizations sponsored most of the early murals.)

A critical factor underlying the intensity of local organizing and national mass protests was the historic impact of the civil-rights movement. Essentially a struggle for democratic rights, it had affected many strata of society and had developed many economic, political, and cultural demands. It had spread rapidly, involving millions of people and giving examples of mass protests and local organizing. It had gained limited but substantive victories in legislation for voting rights and equal economic opportunity. The songs, linked arms, work with school children, experiments in street theatre, reintroduction of the mimeograph machine as a weapon of free speech, underground press, use of militant art images—all had manifested a new sense of cultural freedom. This new cultural ambience, and the issues of protest and positive alternatives that came to fill it, created the possibilities and space in which a mural movement could emerge and grow.

The civil-rights movement's struggle for democratic rights was pregnant with a larger struggle for economic equity, cultural expression, and, ultimately, revolutionary demands. The spread of the black movement from the rural South to the urban South and North, the shift from integrationism to "Black Liberation," and the increased emphasis on empowerment all reflected new tendencies.

The rapid evolution of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is one example of how the black-people's movement went from civil rights to ever larger circles of demands. In the beginnings, more than any other group, SNCC made the call for black power its slogan in voter-registration drives such as that in Lowndes County, Mississippi. SNCC also was one of the first groups to raise the issue of the Vietnam war with its indignant chant of "Hell no! We won't go!" SNCC also exemplified, in its philosophy and practice, a New Left type of radicalism. Unlike most other civil-rights organizations, SNCC was people centered rather than leader centered. It opposed both the Republican and Democratic parties, and it viewed itself as less centralized, sectarian, and regimented than the older leftist parties. As James Forman has recalled, SNCC also "fought against the American value system of making money and paid its staff only subsistence. . . . It believed in sending its staff to work with the most wretched of the earth while some of the organizations thought this was a waste of time. . . . It argued for a basic revolution in American society, while others always advocated change within the present system."[1]

Working-class militancy, with ups and downs, generally rose after the mid-1960s, among both blacks and whites. Martin Luther King's personal evolution reflected the broader trend, as he cast his lot in the last months of his life with the working class (e.g. striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee). Workers came increasingly to voice their discontent with speedups, unsafe working conditions, polluted neighborhoods, loss of life in Vietnam, and war-related inflation. The diffusion of protest throughout society was occasionally symbolized even in the names of groups—e.g. "Black Panthers," "White Panthers," "Grey Panthers" (elderly people). Growing segments of the white working class and petite bourgeoisie were becoming disgruntled with the government. They observed the concessions made to blacks as indicative of what protest activity might win, even as some of them found their antiblack feelings aggravated. The long-term trend seemed to be a kind of

[1] "Black America, Organize and Struggle," *Guardian*, July 24, 1974.

dialectic between the diffusion of social protest and limited concessions on the one hand, and a combination of co-optation, repression, and racism on the other. The overall effect was unmistakable; growing alienation from traditional values and the status quo, disaffection from the government, and the growth of movements for social change to multiracial proportions.

The shift away from integrationism and reformism toward empowerment and radicalism touched a vibrant chord in many people. The electrifying impact of the cries for black power and "Power to the People" necessarily affected artists and intellectuals as well. The black-power movement, for example, attempted to redefine the self-image of black people and searched for the historical and cultural heritage for that identity in a way that involved the sympathy and emotions of almost every minority person in the country. People everywhere sought to establish their sense of selfhood, their cultural identity, their own image, their own heritage. People wanted to control their own media, their own schools, their own lives. This mass quality of the cultural quest for identity necessarily brought great pressure to bear on nonwhite artists and intellectuals, as well as on their more socially conscious white counterparts, to join in the struggle. They became aware that they could play a very meaningful role in the rising tide of popular struggle through the talents and skills they had developed, rather than with their marching feet alone. As the myth of melting-pot America was laid to rest, not just blacks, but others—Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asians, women, Native Americans, white ethnics—joined in rediscovering their cultural heritage and with it a new pride and dignity in themselves.

The struggles and cultures of other nations had an energizing impact on those now in movement. A strong sense of identification with liberation struggles abroad began to influence significant sectors of the antiwar and black-empowerment movements. The politics and cultures of countries like Algeria, Ghana, Tanzania, Cuba, China, North Korea, Vietnam itself, became a subject of study and sometimes of rather strained and posturing emulation. People came to recognize their historic links with other countries and to sense

new possibilities for affecting revolutionary change. The student movement saw itself as having international dimensions, as 1968 became known around the world, even in Eastern Europe, as the year of international student revolt. Growing numbers of oppressed people took on an analysis of their own struggles "within the belly of the monster" as parallel to Third World struggles against imperialism.

As the anti-imperialist analysis gained strength, a new commonality began to emerge between the struggle of the Vietnamese against aggression in Southeast Asia, and the struggle of groups at home, which tended toward a unification between the largely white antiwar movement and the movements of oppressed minorities. King came out for the antiwar movement in 1967. Black and white GIs in Vietnam and elsewhere began to unify in ever larger numbers against their situation in the service. Soon thereafter, Vietnam veterans against the war moved to the forefront of the antiwar movement. The population as a whole shifted more and more toward an antiwar position. Rank-and-file workers' caucuses sprang up as wildcat strikes spread in unprecedented numbers. The National Guard was called out to quell rebellions in city after city between 1965 and 1968, and the nation's leading politicians spoke of the "dangerous unraveling of the social fabric."

In retrospect, it can be seen that the victories won by the civil-rights movement effectively blew the lid off the McCarthyite era of silence and opened the way for expanding a struggle for democratic rights into a class struggle. Out of the ensuing ferment and the many organizing activities, there emerged a growing number of neighborhood murals. These murals spread across the nation as part of the general creative outburst accompanying the various community organizing efforts and community-development programs. Community arts overlapped with local legal struggles, direct-action movements, self-defense efforts, rising community militancy. From this human potential there developed the contemporary mural movement, one of many steps in the long march down the road of reappropriation of art and culture by the people.

Art-World Context

The mural movement coincided with the desire of artists to move out from the museums. Much of the avant-garde felt a need to expand the ever-shrinking audience for visual art and to regain a sense of relevant interaction with society. The social upheavals of the 1960s only accentuated these needs.

The art scene of the late 1960s was characterized by a bewildering succession of styles, accompanied by solemn pronouncements of "the death of painting," "the exhaustion of formalism," etc. In the space of a few years, painting went from Pop to Op to Minimal, from hard edge to stain. Some artists gave up painting altogether and moved to stronger stimuli: mixed media and audience-participation art, environmental art, Happenings, disposable art. Some dabbled with scientism and technologism, producing kinetic art, computer art, light art, and machine art. Each of these had its season in New York City and was as quickly passé.

Artworks, however avant-garde, were consumed like other merchandise. The more avant-garde, the better. Even those artworks that appeared to be unsalable because there was no art object to buy or sell, as in the earthworks and other Conceptual art, were sold and exhibited. This seemingly infinite capacity of the art world to commercialize even the most "avant" of avant-garde art only evoked further rebellion in the ranks of artists. They expressed their anger at this co-optation of even antiart works during demonstrations against the Dada exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, March 1968. Artists objected to the museum's co-opting an "anarchic revolutionary movement" and "reducing it to no more than a collection of boutique objects."[2]

Art critics, gallery owners, museum spokesmen, collectors, professors, art students, seized on each innovation as they tried to forecast the next step in the history of art. According to the ideological

[2] Therese M. Schwartz, "The Politicalization of the Avant-Garde," *Art in America* (November–December 1971): 100.

legacy of the "embattled avant-garde," new and rebellious art forms should be initially misunderstood and rejected by society and the established art institutions. But the avant-garde had become the academy. For economic reasons, most well-known artists taught at university or professional art schools. The institutions of the art world, the art schools and the museums, had taken on many of the avant-garde values, institutionalized them, taught them, and vied for who could produce or show the newest advance.

Artists suffered from instability in the international art market and speculation by collectors in styles. For example, 1968 was the year of the Minimal in art. This was certified by two important events: The Museum of Modern Art's show of Minimal art, the "Art of the Real," and the decision by Documenta IV, an important international art show, to devote their exhibition exclusively to two styles, Minimal and Op. These two shows served to guarantee investments in those styles by providing international certification of their importance. They also placed great pressure on artists to conform, at least to some extent, with these movements. Since only "in" styles were exhibited by important shows in any one season, even the established "stars" of the art world were under some pressure to conform to the current trends if they wished to be seen.

By maintaining at least a partial monopoly of style each year, investors could be assured that the works they bought would have their place in art history and thereby gain a secure value. This type of marketing led to pressure on artists to specialize and produce a kind of "trademark" art that could be bought and sold with some assurance. The owner of, for example, a Larry Bell cube or a black painting by Ad Reinhardt, while he had an original one-of-a-kind object, also had bought a trademark item.

The artist of conviction, of course, refused to be influenced by marketing considerations. However, even when well-known and respected, he was confronted by his own powerlessness in the face of this type of manipulation by museums and exhibitions. Avant-garde artists rebelling against this situation found their interests coinciding, at least temporarily, with those on the fringes of the art world,

e.g. women and black artists, who were attempting to use the impetus and tools of the social rebellions to break open a niche for themselves in the museum world. From this uneasy alliance came the demonstrations for artists' rights; picketing of museums; boycotting of international shows; formation of artist coalitions, cooperatives, or unions; and the establishment of workshop galleries, women's art centers, etc.

For those artists whose personal convictions propelled them beyond artists' rights toward participation in the movements against the war in Southeast Asia or for one of the national liberation struggles in the United States, the situation was far more complex. Even within the highly permissive avant-garde aesthetic, there remained one taboo: the insertion of social content into an artwork. As antiwar artist Abe Ajay, one of the signers of the 1965 artists' statement against the war, put it: "I believe the fine artist should sign strong statements against evil at every opportunity and keep his legs in shape for long marches on the Pentagon. As a strict constructivist, however, I believe an artist's work should be clean as a hound's tooth of politics and social protest imagery."[3]

The ability of some avant-garde artists to live this split existence is perhaps most apparent in the case of Donald Judd, who was an antiwar activist and at the same time a leader of the Minimal-art movement. However, others found this kind of split existence schizophrenic and searched for some way to unify their politics and their art. In the next major antiwar action by artists, the Los Angeles Peace Tower of 1966, the physical presence of artists was still more important than their artistic endeavor, even though artwork was included as part of the action. The importance of the Peace Tower lay in its construction and defense, and in the publicity generated by the bodily presence and participation of well-known artists. The tower included 418 two-foot-square paintings in every conceivable style hung as a decorative band well above eye level. The placement of these small paintings so far from view re-

3 *Ibid.*

flected their function. They were meant to symbolize artistic involvement, but they were not to be seen or studied for themselves.

The Angry Arts Week of 1967 seemed to provide a more serious attempt to use art itself rather than the signatures or bodies of the artists for protest. As part of the New York week, there was a *Collage of Indignation*, which included among its makers many leaders of the avant-garde. But, for the most part, these artists found themselves unable to contribute art. Instead, as a way out of the dilemma, they scrawled graffiti, expletives, or their names. The movement toward Happenings and other forms that used the artist's body provided a limited avenue toward protest art within the mainstream art world. Occasional individuals, like environmentalist-sculptor Edward Kienholz or some of the Pop artists, created an undercurrent of socially critical art acceptable in the art world; but for most artists, there seemed to exist no viable way within established norms to breach the purist barrier in the more traditional artistic media.

To those on the fringes of the art scene (students and aspiring artists) as well as those artists who had never been "in" (women, blacks, and Latins), the futility of these isolated gestures was clear. Those unwilling to choose between art and activism or to reconcile themselves to a schizophrenic existence in which their art and their politics had to remain totally distinct came to question the basic assumptions of the avant-garde ideology and practice as such.

For many artists, this led to a new analysis of the role of art and the artist in bourgeois society. A new awareness of the ideological role of abstract art and its relationship to the existing social structure came to the fore simultaneously with the questioning of "objectivity" and the alleged "end of ideology" in other contexts. As "value-free" social science was seen to epitomize certain white male values, so too "value-free" art was recognized as containing certain values and an ideology of its own. The social isolation of the artist, and the tendency of much art to appear as a luxury unrelated to masses of people, were not accidental phenomena. They were rooted in the rise of capitalism, the demise of traditional patronage systems, and the growing separation between the worker and his product.

Under industrial capitalism, the artist, like other marginal small producers, is squeezed by the forces of market competition. At the mercy of middlemen, dealers, and gallery owners, the artist receives only the first price for his work and retains little control over its use after it has left his studio. Although he regards himself as part of the intellectual and professional stratum of the petite bourgeoisie, the artist is often worse off economically than a common laborer. Only by becoming famous through the system of publicity that surrounds the marketing of art and having his work become an object of speculation can the artist raise his prices, gain access to private patrons, and begin to rise from his economically lumpen position. Art may be respected, but the artist is misunderstood, isolated, or ignored. The practical bourgeois has no respect for the artist because he is poor, while the working class thinks he is crazy.

This marginal and anomalous position of the artist is rationalized by romantic ideas of misunderstood genius: the elitist ideology of the avant-garde. The roots of avant-gardism are in the nineteenth century, when artists began to produce with new freedom but in a social vacuum for an anonymous audience, their work a commodity in a market economy. To the bourgeoisie, art is increasingly a nonessential luxury, an object of conspicuous consumption, a status symbol, as well as an object of speculation and a means of investing surplus capital. To maintain their tenuous social position and their self-respect, many artists began to create works that were both antimasses and antibourgeois: art for the artist and his select circle, "art for art's sake."

The glossing over of the antibourgeois intention or content of much avant-garde art was aided by the tendency of formalist criticism to isolate the object from its context. This was reinforced by the individualist character of the artworks, which made it necessary for critics and museum spokesmen to explain the work to the public. John Berger, the English critic, defines mystification as "the process of explaining away what might otherwise be evident."[4] Formalist criticism, by discussing the work of art in purely visual terms and the history of art as a series of formal innovations, art breeding art,

[4] *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books & BBC, 1973), pp. 15-16.

serves as the perfect vehicle for this mystification. When social context, historical conditions, and even statements of intent by the artist are considered basically extraneous to an understanding of the artwork, its antibourgeois aspects are disregarded or ignored. The object of artistic endeavor becomes essentially the successful resolution of certain formal problems, and the connoisseur can enjoy any artwork, from any culture, equally—and with total disregard for its original meaning.

This type of criticism, dominant in America until the very recent resurgence of a more socially oriented point of view, was important in making avant-garde works acceptable. The eminent critic Gregory Battcock defined the contemporary critic's role in his anthology of art criticism, *The New Art*:

For art is not merely a question of understanding, but of acceptance and response. Since people have so much to lose by facing up to the challenge of art, they will not—cannot—do so. . . . The critic has, as it were, to paint the painting anew and make it more acceptable, less of a threat than it often is. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the art of our time could not exist without the efforts of the critic.[5]

In defining what this society considers to be "art," the critic works hand in hand with the museums. What the critic explains, the museum certifies. Through massive educational programs, museums attempt to convince the public of the excellence of the art they select to show. The message is: If you are educated and sensitive, you will like it. Yet museums represent only one class in a divided society. Founded, and for the most part still controlled, by individual wealthy families, museums are staffed by officials who are responsible to the boards of trustees rather than to city governments, representatives of artistic communities, or city residents. Although many people correctly sense the antipopular content of much of abstract art and reject it because it does not speak to them, museums seek to convince people that this art is universal and

5 *The New Art: A Critical Anthology* (rev. ed.; New York: Dutton Paperbacks, 1973), p. xviii.

should be enjoyed by all. The mystification and confusion that result isolate culture from its human relevance, while reinforcing class divisions.

In U.S. society, the gap between the artist and the masses and the separation between art and society have reached their most extreme form. Some of the explanation for this lies in the particularity of American social development. Unlike the nations of Western Europe, the United States has had no aristocratic tradition of culture. With the exception of indigenous Indian civilizations, which were systematically eliminated or isolated, there existed no historical basis for a high respect for culture or artists. The American bourgeoisie did not sponsor the creation of an "American" high culture but simply attempted to import or appropriate European culture whole hog.

Those who were to become the mass of the American working-class population were conquered peoples and immigrants: Indians, African slaves, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Irish, Jews, Germans, Italians, etc. They were deprived of their native arts. (This was more true of visual arts, because of their nontransportability, than of other cultural forms, such as music, dance, cooking, or dress.) The melting-pot ideology pressured immigrants to abandon their ethnic and national heritages and to become "Americans." Through the homogenization of American culture, furthered by the monopolization of ownership of newspapers, radio, and television, a strong and uniform image of what constitutes "being American" is, and has been, constantly presented to the populace. Many of these American values reflect the Anglo-Saxon, Puritan view of art and all sensual forms of expression as wasteful or tainted by evil and decadence. This antiart attitude was compounded by the democratic ethos of the early settlers and immigrants, which rejected aristocratic forms and manners. These particularly American factors produced a greater alienation of the masses from art than in cultures with a different artistic heritage.

Thus, artists in America were more marginal and further removed from social acceptance than in older societies. This eventually

led to even more extreme avant-gardism and antipopular attitudes among American artists than among those in Europe. At the same time, throughout the history of American art, there has been a strong counterthrust toward a more democratic art, represented by such artists as John Sloan, Winslow Homer, Ben Shahn, and Jacob Lawrence. The history of American art can be read as a dialectic of alternating currents between avant-gardism, usually tied to European movements and a total rejection of American materialism and culture, and attempts to create an American style: artists of the Ashcan school, regionalists and American scene painters, and some Pop artists, who have tried to integrate art with their society in some meaningful fashion.

Paradoxically, the capacity of American consumer society to consume and the insatiable appetite of the media for novelty in any form have created an openness to abstract styles within the general public. Advertising in the mass media, especially television, has integrated stylistic innovations from the art world into its commercials and has introduced the general public to complex visual-art styles. These visual styles, used, for example, as a background for 7-Up commercials, introduce people to abstract styles, although not to abstract art. Use by advertisers of complex visual styles and artistic innovations give to these forms a content and context (that of the product, social prestige, modernity, etc.) that are readily understandable. These ads show that people will accept any style, so long as they understand why it is being used and what its meaning is. In the mystifying world of the museums, however, where the context and content become art for art's sake, an expression of a kind of class solidarity of a select audience, these styles are rejected by the majority of the people.

In the late 1960s more than ever, the people were left with an art that refused to address them or the social realities of their lives. The process of deculturation of the masses, which had begun with the loss of their native arts through "Americanization" and had been magnified by the increasing elitism of avant-garde art that no longer made even a token attempt at communication, was compounded by

the "education" policy of the museums and art institutions, which proclaimed a class-exclusive culture as universal. At the same time, the mass media bombarded the masses with a full complement of escapist entertainment that did not satisfy the need for a true culture.

The social upheavals of the 1960s, which affected both artists and the masses, left the socially conscious artist with few options. New demands for meaningful culture were being made by protest and liberation movements—demands that, within the accepted parameters of the art world, were unfulfillable. It was in this context that mural art reemerged as a realistically possible solution to the problem.

6 The Chicago Mural Group

John Pitman Weber

There is no way to explain in words why we are in the Chicago Mural Group paint murals. But meeting people outdoors on the street to talk about the richness of human experience and history is ONE very important part of it. To be complimented by hard working and righteous people, rather than gallery owners and the hoi polloi, is for me another crucial part of why I paint murals–murals about the lives and experiences of real people.

–Jim Yanagisawa.

Founded in 1970 by William Walker and myself, the Chicago Mural Group (CMG) is a cooperative with a dozen members–black, Latin, Asian, and white; both men and women–dedicated to meaningful public art in Chicago's neighborhoods. Its programs function under the auspices of the Community Arts Foundation (CAF), a nonprofit organization that also accommodates various community and experimental theatre groups. CMG gives equal weight to professionalism and community involvement. Each of CMG's more than fifty outdoor murals and two dozen indoor murals has been locally sponsored. CMG receives funding from the National En-
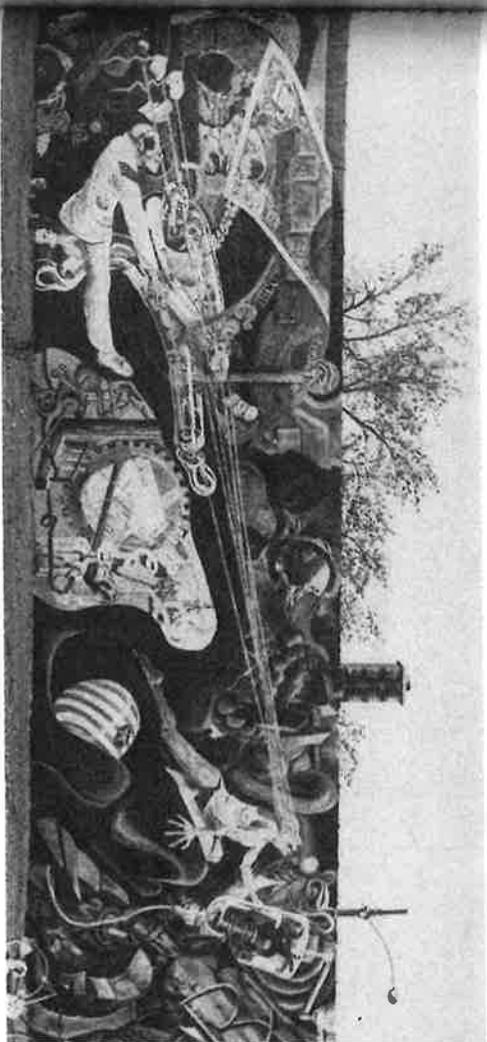
59. CMG artists (Caryl Yasko, Mitchell Caton, Justine DeVan, Celia Radek, Lucyna Radycki, Joseph Pajkos): Prescription for Good Health Care. 1975. Chicago.

dowment for the Arts (NEA) Visual Arts Program and various local foundations. Members of neighborhood organizations and other local residents and youths contribute to the development of themes and often participate in painting. The group has organized photo-documentary exhibits on mural art and has given seminars, workshop courses, and innumerable slide shows for community audiences. It maintains a workshop-information center in CAF's "Body Politic" building.

In the late fall 1974, William Walker left the group to form his own program. At the time of this writing (1975), members of the group include myself, Mitchell Caton, Ray Patlán, Caryl Yasko, Barry Bruner, Jim Yanagisawa, Santi Isrowuthakul, Astrid Fuller, Esther Charbit, Oscar Martinez, José Guerrero, Amit Ray, and Justine DeVan.[1] The following account reflects on the reasons for the group's vitality and longevity, as well as its chronic internal problems.

[1] Other artists who have worked with the group include Lucyna Radycki, Don Pellett, Eugene Eda, Albert Zeno, John Robinson, Kathie Judge, Louis Boyd, John Allen, Doug Williams, Ron Blackburn, Ruth Felton, George Lee, Anne Sevaglio; young artists Steve Stahl, Celia Radek, Beth Shadur, Vanita Green, Dalton Brown, Turtle Onli, Yolanda Galvan, Carlos Barrera, Patti Hesse, Renée Majeune; and numerous nonprofessional neighborhood artists.

It was the *Wall of Respect*, which I first saw in 1968, that made me think of walls. I had participated in artists' contingents at demonstrations and in antiwar art shows with a mounting sense of frustration. The following summer, 1969, with the encouragement of Brother Joachim of Saint Dominic's Church in Cabrini-Green, I painted a mural in the church courtyard together with a group of teen-agers. It was a simple declarative statement on a low retaining wall: *All Power to the People*. I was excited about the possibilities of large-scale mural work.

Characteristically for someone practiced in completing scholarship forms, a veteran of social programs such as More Encouragement and Push-Up, I wrote articles and proposals. I drafted a proposal for a community-based mural project in three low-income North Side neighborhoods, which called for "collective mural painting to be done by teen-age youth from economically deprived and culturally excluded communities with the direction, encouragement, and participation of young professional artists."

In late spring 1970, Margaret Burroughs, founder of the DuSable Museum of African-American History, put me in touch with Bill Walker, and Walker asked Eugene Eda to come from Washington, D.C., to join us. Financial problems limited what we could do. With less than one fourth of the funds originally requested in our proposal, only Walker, Eda, and myself could be paid. We received no monies until late July–a pattern to be repeated every summer, causing us anxiety and delays. Consequently, there were no paid assistants as foreseen in the proposal and no true collective murals, although we did provide paint for a number of satellite murals, and community involvement was active and real. Our experience led to the conclusion that large-scale projects involving the commitment of scaffolding could only be done on a full-time basis, implying the continued necessity of outside funding.

Nonetheless, we concluded our season in high spirits, with feelings of mutual solidarity, commitment, and confidence. We were inspired by a larger vision of mural art and a high sense of our responsibility as public artists. Before us opened the vista of an independent "people's art," challenging the gallery art world and challenging us to equal and surpass the Mexicans. In November, Joseph Shapiro of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, approached us with a proposal for an exhibit in the museum's lower gallery during which the public could watch us paint on panels. Mark Rogovin joined us, playing an important role in the negotiations and relations with the press. Mitchell Caton also participated.

Much to Shapiro's surprise, the artists were more concerned about their standing with the community audience than with the "unparalleled opportunity" he was offering. We were equally concerned that the middle-class art public not be merely entertained by a novelty without ever seeking out the murals in the neighborhoods. We obtained the publication of a manifesto (*The Artists' Statement*) and a directory of murals, two thousand free tickets for distribution by community organizations, permission to hold a forum on public art in evening hours, as well as all supplies and the right to donate our panel murals to community organizations of our choice.

At the end of the show, which had run during February and March 1971, Rogovin went his own way, already deeply involved in efforts to create the Public Arts Workshop (PAW). Walker, Eda, Caton, and I continued meetings concerning a proposal Walker originated for giant murals in the Robert Taylor housing project. Eda gradually drifted away. The museum panels he had done for Olivet Church went unmounted, and he later withdrew from the group to pursue his personal development.

All of this winter activity, including Walker's two murals with children that spring, was considered separate from the CAF Community Mural Project summer program. Not yet a cooperative group, we were a fragile, seasonal *ad hoc* coalition. During July 1971, while I was deeply involved in painting murals in Westtown and

in despair of long-delayed funding, I lost touch with the other artists. When Caton and Walker called us together in the second week of August, it was the first meeting of the Community Mural Project as such.

Much was accomplished that second summer: Nine murals were painted, some of them team murals; a pattern of materials and equipment being paid for locally was established; Ray Patlán joined the staff; the first seminars and tours for residents of mural neighborhoods were held. But we also encountered fundamental problems with which the group would struggle periodically from then on. These were the contradictions between three tendencies: the self-reliant local autonomy of each artist in his area; centralized administrative decisions concerning funding, at that time basically in my hands; and our cooperative ideals. With five artists scattered on the North and South sides, the difficulties of communication and planning had outgrown the possibilities of informal visiting and consulting. The administrative work—proposals, reports, photography, publicity—was an intolerable burden for one person. At the same time, it created an irritating situation of dependence for the other artists, isolating us from one another and holding back our development. We had to become a group. Bit by bit, in response to specific problems, we clarified our aims and program, preparing for a leap forward the following summer.

During the summer of 1972, the group expanded to its maximum limits, including women and Asian artists. Walker brought Caryl Yasko into the group. Astrid Fuller was one of Caryl's volunteer assistants. Jim Yanagisawa worked with George Lee on the first Chinatown mural. Ray Patlán introduced us to his 1971 assistant, Santi Isrowuthakul. Isrowuthakul, a Thai national studying at the Art Institute, worked as my assistant in Central Lakeview along with Barry Bruner. He then directed two murals with Steve Stahl. With his extraordinary adaptability, which enabled him to work with every different ethnic group and age level, and his delight in the
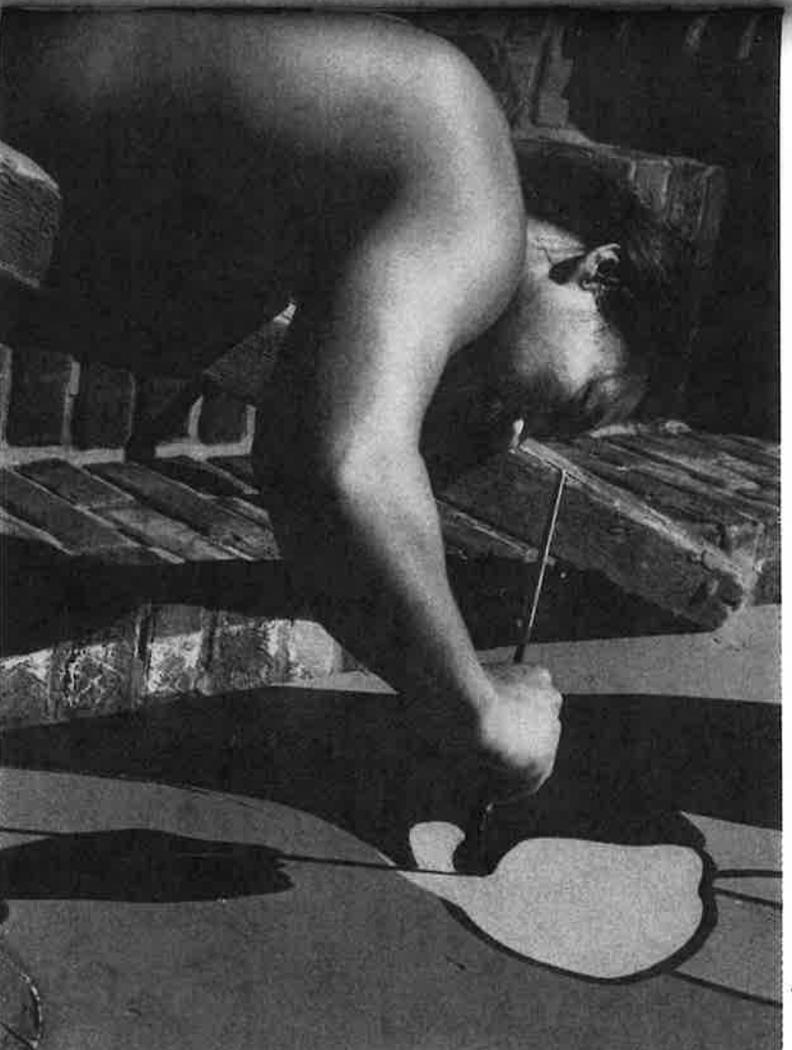
60. *Santi Isrowuthakul at work, 1972.*

social activity of murals, Isrowuthakul brought several other student artists into mural painting.

Throughout the summer of 1972 and into the fall we had regular business meetings in this expanded group—"veterans" and "beginners," volunteer apprentices, and student artists. We examined what we had been doing in a scattered, spontaneous way and realized that in effect we were involved in year-round activity—in the communities, in the schools, in planning and preparation for the summer, in educating the public, as well as in actual painting. We made some modest attempts to share administrative work. For the first time, we took a name, the Chicago Mural Movement Group (later shortened), which was distinct from our federally funded summer program (the Community Mural Project). We held our first retrospective exhibit at the South Side Community Art Center in November.

The summer of 1972, our third season, ends the early history of the group. Since then, although other artists have joined and a few have left, the size of the group has remained roughly constant. Its organization and programs have developed along the lines already suggested. We have built up our workshop center (which opened in June 1973), experimented with various approaches to training young artists, and worked in the schools. Kathie Judge was our first workshop coordinator, succeeded by Caryl Yasko, who also took over coordinating administration in 1974. For funding purposes, summer activity was divided into South Side and North Side projects in 1973. Since 1972 we have been consolidating and stabilizing, learning from one another and raising our level of work.

A Neighborhood-based, Community-sponsored Group

Local sponsorship means local control. The artist is accountable to the local sponsors in a far more direct way than to any outside funding, because it is the local sponsors who supply the absolute essentials: the walls, the paint, and the equipment. The necessity of raising funds locally makes the muralist an organizer, with a certain margin of initiative and possibilities for choosing one's own situation. We have made it a policy to refuse commercial work, "pizza-parlor murals," and contests. The only purpose of a competition is to place the choice of design safely in the hands of a select few: owners or bureaucrats. We insist on a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Control of the theme must rest with grass-roots people, whether the membership of a sponsoring organization or a designated group (teen-agers, etc.), and control of design must rest with the artists (to be worked out in dialogue between the artists and the community).

Consequently, our themes have dealt with aspirations of the oppressed; with unity (in multinational areas especially); with community concerns about housing, health, drug abuse; and with ethnic and labor history. We have rarely been able to deal with international themes directly and explicitly, whether the Vietnam war or
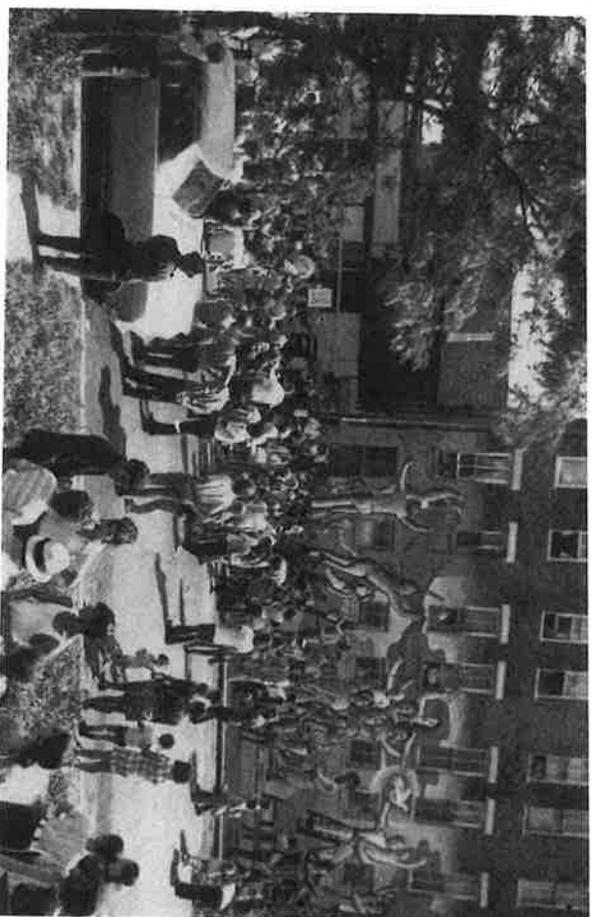
61. *John Weber and team: dedication for People of Lakeview Unite. 1972. Chicago.*
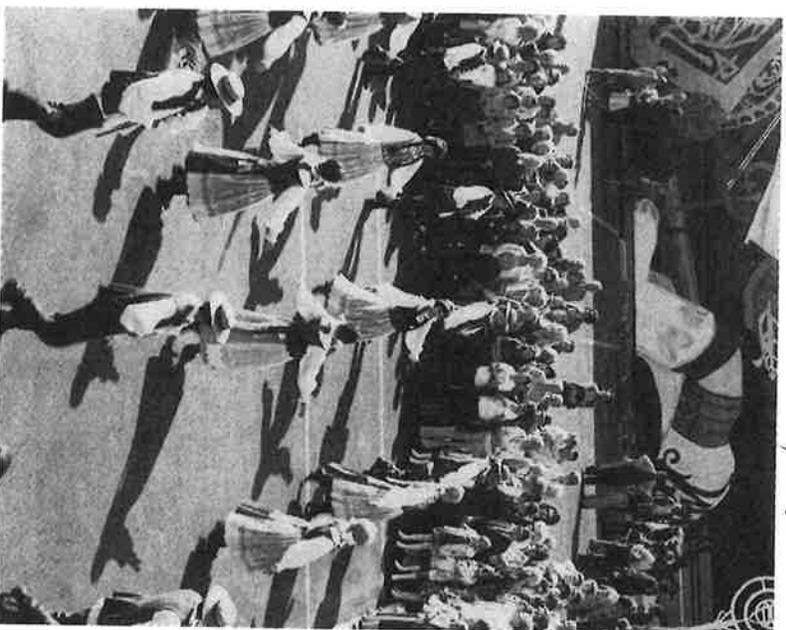
62. *Caryl Yasko, Celia Radek, Lucyna Radycki, Justine DeVan, Jon Kokot, and community helpers: dedication for Razem ("Together"). 1975. Chicago.*

African liberation. On the other hand, local sponsorship has been a bulwark against outside forms of censorship, since the community sponsor assumes public responsibility for a mural's content. We have been very aware of this as a strength when confronted by local police, cranks, or racists. In practice, the artists and their teams have great latitude in interpreting chosen community themes, while the accountability to local sponsors has made it possible to work in almost every type of urban area (pl. 18).

Local sponsorship has necessarily put limitations on large-scale work and work in permanent media. It is rarely possible to raise more than a few hundred dollars in cash in any one working-class area; the rest is made up in donated materials and volunteer help. Corresponding to the spread and scale of Chicago neighborhoods, we have done numerous medium-size walls, but only a few two thousand square feet or more. Much of our winter activity—slide shows, exhibits, maintaining our center—is directed toward broadening our public base. Our training seminars and workshops for student artists and teachers are also part of this base-building activity.

Autonomy of the Artist

Winter activities, largely unfunded and carried on part time, have never engaged the energies of the whole group. The relationship of these winter activities to our basic summer program has been fairly loose, and sometimes questioned by nonparticipating members. Such autonomy of initiative and allowance for individual variance has allowed a large, multiethnic group to continue together with only seasonal funding, but it has also made our existence as a group extremely precarious.

Reflecting our recognition of the need for artist autonomy, our approaches have ranged from individually designed and executed "signature" murals, to directed team murals, to collective children's murals. Walker and I brought complementary conceptions to the

group—I that of the artist as organizer and facilitator, he that of the artist as prophet and professional muralist. Over the years, a certain interchange and mutual learning between these conceptions has taken place. Walker made it a practice of working alone during the summer. Nonetheless, in 1972–73 he proposed collective projects, following the pattern of the first Chicago and Detroit walls: large horizontal walls divided up into sections, each artist doing one or more sections, the whole to be united by a common theme and perhaps a common color scheme. In 1975, he worked with Mitchell Caton and Santi Isrowuthakul on an antidrug mural of this type. From time to time, Walker devoted himself to assisting and advising other group members. Caton and Astrid Fuller have also emphasized individual work, although Caton has occasionally done joint projects, has allowed children to contribute to his work, and has regularly included poems by Siddha and photographs by Bobby Sengestacke in his murals.

At the other extreme, Ray Patlán, Barry Bruner, Esther Charbit, and Justine DeVan (the last three are art teachers) have tended to see themselves as facilitators of the collective expression of young people. Patlán has designed his individual murals only indoors, leading collective projects outdoors. The Asian and Latin members of the group have been the most active in collaborative murals. In their Asian-Latin mural, Jim Yanagisawa and Oscar Martinez, instead of relying on visual clichés, researched the parallels of the labor history and immigrant experience of both peoples, working together on the drawing and painting for both sides of the two-piece mural. Caryl Yasko and I, also advocating collective and collaborative work, usually work with teams of local residents or mixed student-resident teams and give very strong direction to the design of team murals, ensuring a highly unified look to the result. The presence of this diversity of approaches has allowed the artists of our group to vary their methods from one project to another, according to circumstances and personal needs, without any feelings of guilt about violating a set program.

63. *James Yanagisawa and Oscar Martinez: Asian-Latin mural (detail). 1974. Chicago.*

Learning

Another major concern of CMG, again a concern shared with other muralists in Chicago, has been with *becoming* muralists. This interest in mastering the lessons of the great tradition and in developing a contemporary aesthetic that reflects a specifically mural character is perhaps nowhere stronger than in Chicago, and is in particularly marked contrast to the attitudes of urban decorators working on a commission basis.[2] Direct work on the wall has been the most important source of learning for us, and is almost a cult among Chicago muralists.

2 Interesting precedents for our attitudes may be found in the anthology by Francis V. O'Connor, *Art for the Millions* (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973). See, for example, the pieces by Mitchel Siporin, "Mural Art and the Midwestern Myth" (p. 64), and Edgar Britton, "A Muralist Speaks His Mind" (p. 67).

Awareness of the mural tradition entered the Chicago movement from several sources. Bill Walker's affinity to Diego Rivera is both profound and conscious. Eugene Eda's early work shows a certain influence of José Clemente Orozco, together with African influences. I first saw Antonio Rodriguez's *A History of Mexican Mural Painting*[3] at a meeting in Eda's room upstairs in the old DuSable Museum in the fall of 1970. CMG members have had regular contact with Mexico. Patlán visits Mexico every year, and met the "maestro" in 1971. I visited Siqueiros the following year. In 1974, Patlán met with Chávez Morado. In 1975, through the exchange program of Movimiento Artístico Chicano (MARCH), Gilberto Ramírez of the younger generation of Mexican figurative muralists visited Chicago. It must be said that, despite the great fund of technical knowledge in Mexico, the movement of ideas is now primarily from the United States, where mural painting is much more active.

Mexico has not been the only source of design approaches in Chicago. I brought an interest in Fernand Léger to my early murals. Jim Yanagisawa's work reflects his interest in caricature and photomontage. Mitchell Caton's work is a unique combination of surrealism, decorative cubism, and African design elements. Popular "movement" posters have also been source material for many of the artists.

Concern for aesthetic development has led to an increasing emphasis on *realization* among all of us. Increasing mastery has been seen in successful use of wall shapes, incorporation of architectural accident, and more painterly execution. The process of learning from and with each other has been continuous, not primarily through slide-critique sessions held occasionally in the winter, but through informal visits to each other's murals in progress, on-the-site discussions, and many collaborative projects. We have placed increasing emphasis on collaboration since 1972 and are now again discussing the possibilities of whole-group collaborative murals and mural brigades.

Much learning has been exchanged between muralists within the

3 (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969).
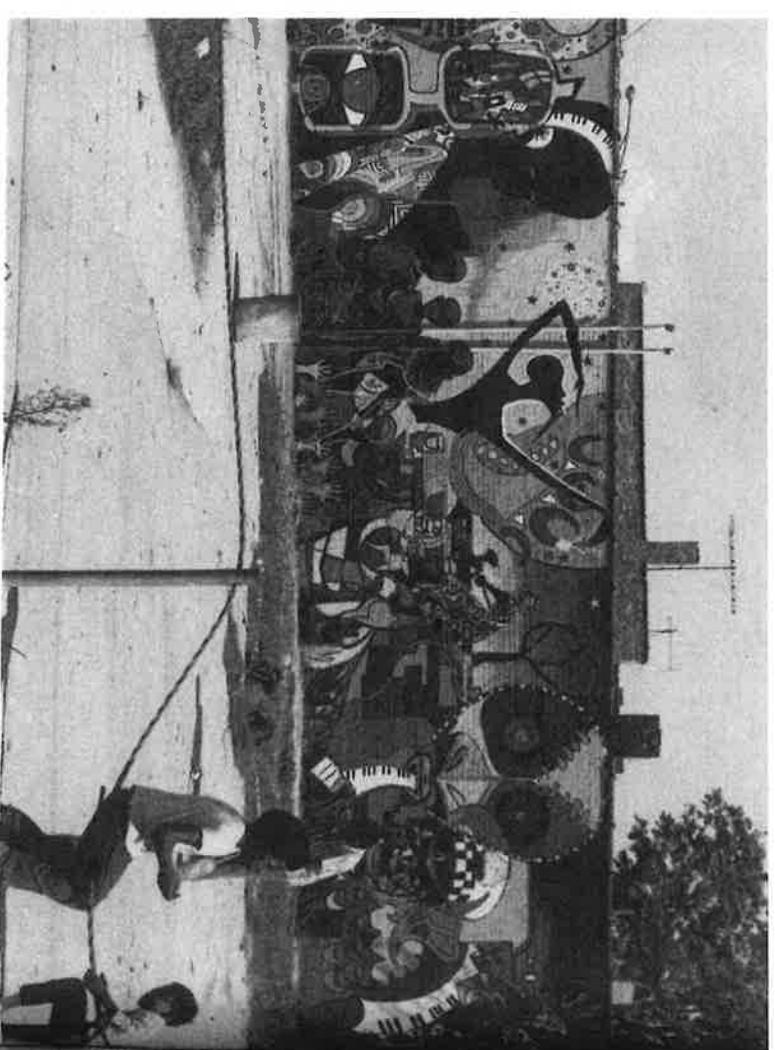
64. *Mitchell Caton: Philosophy of the Spiritual 1972, Chicago.*

United States. Muralists and other artists in Chicago, New York City, and Boston periodically meet or correspond. In 1971, I met Susan Shapiro-Kiok of Cityarts Workshop. Since then, artists from CMG and Cityarts have engaged in a fairly regular dialogue and have learned new techniques from one another. Despite moments of tension, we have had a fairly regular interchange with Mark Rogovin's Public Art Workshop as well, exchanging slides, information, and Mexican contacts. In April 1975, we joined with PAW in a mural festival honoring the new edition of the *Mural Manual*. In certain murals, I have adapted both Rogovin's projected-silhouette method and the graphic style brought back from Chile by Eva Cockcroft. We have had sporadic contacts with the West Coast and various other cities. All these exchanges have been part of an expanding network of contacts between muralists and mural groups around the country.

The Chicago Mural Group

Policy

The structure of CMG corresponds to a clearly understood need for mutual support and a united front in the face of various pressures, a need to minimize competition and individual careerism and to develop common strategies. The central funding of the summer program has allowed the artists to control their own projects, determining commitments and priorities subject only to the limits of ingenuity and energy in raising matching funds. Artist control has always been an essential: We have never had any nonartist administrators.

The prerequisite for membership has been prior mural experience. Walker, Eda, Caton, Patlán, and myself had all painted murals independently before 1970. Virtually all other members have been brought into the group under the sponsorship of one or more members after having worked on at least one mural without stipend. The intention of this requirement is to avoid placing the group in the position of a funding agency open to outside proposals and to eliminate those merely seeking a job. Since 1972, this requirement of at least one mural done on a volunteer basis has generally been understood to mean working with the CMG as an unpaid assistant. This apprenticeship has given new artists a chance to become familiar with both community organizing and mural scale, materials, and equipment without bearing the burden of full responsibility. In the few cases where we have waived this apprenticeship, bowing to the inflated egos of young artists, near disasters or poor-quality work have resulted. Our apprenticeship policy has allowed a wide variety of artists to enter mural painting without regard to degrees or gallery recognition, including self-taught artists, art teachers, art students, graphic artists, and ceramists. However, the demand that the apprenticeship be unpaid puts an unequal burden on unemployed artists and may discourage certain others—in particular, nonwhite or working-class artists. For this reason, CMG has, when resources allowed, provided small stipends.

Our group could be described as a task-oriented cooperative. There has been little discussion of general politics in meetings but a great deal of discussion about practical problems (including political ones) arising in our work. Issues have been struggled through as they arose in the life of the group. From the beginning, the group has had a fairly clear "serve the people" philosophy. The general tone of the group and its multiracial character have placed certain demands on all members. From the outset, we committed ourselves to being based in oppressed and working-class neighborhoods. We emphasized working with the people and winning their support, rather than doing art for them in a missionary spirit. The group demanded that its members do murals with readable themes, create an art that brings consciousness to the people, oppose all oppression, and champion the necessity of all people uniting. In a few cases, artists have left the group in part because of what they felt was pressure from the "heavy" political atmosphere and the emphasis on "struggle" and "relating to community problems."

Problems and Contradictions

Contradictions and problems were built into our group from the outset. Being multinational, we had to deal with differences of language, expectations, and cultural context. The geographic spread of our work created further problems of communication. Lack of transportation reduced visiting. For example, on the South Side, the Chinatown and Pilsen (Chicano) projects tended to remain isolated from the rest of the South Side artists, both black and white. Despite these problems, the multinational character of the group has been a point of pride for all of us and one of the main reasons artists have joined and stayed with the group. The strength of our feeling about being multinational has been reflected in the frequency of multiethnic themes in our work.

There is little doubt that our size, multiracial character, and geographic spread have been severe handicaps in obtaining funding.

Certain foundations have rejected our proposals because they involved more than one neighborhood. We do not fit their guidelines. Remaining together has also put a limit on the federal funds available to us. One result has been our inability to pay assistants or to maintain a core group on stipend more than a few months each year. Each artist in the group has also paid a price in criticism received from other artists of their own community or nationality. Nonetheless, the group has rejected all suggestions that we split up in order to develop single-neighborhood or single-nationality groups.

The recurrent tensions between de facto centralization of administrative decisions, the local autonomy of the artists, and our collective decision making on policy are not unrelated to our heterogeneous character. In practice, the group has been neither a paid-staff program nor a purely voluntary coalition, but both simultaneously, displaying the strengths and weaknesses of each. Until the summer of 1975, the group never designated any official leadership or spokespersons. Moral leadership was exercised by senior members, who initiated and led most of the major internal struggles for unity. Without an elected leadership with clear authority, however, the pressures of day-to-day business and survival continually tended to erode unity. We alternated between attempting to deal with day-to-day administration in whole-group meetings or leaving it in the hands of one or two people—again without any official mandate or provision of salary for administrative work.

Our lack of structure and emphasis on local autonomy encouraged tendencies to regard CMG as a source of funding rather than as a membership group. Certain artists attended meetings sporadically and only during our summer grant period. Artists neglected to mention membership in the group in their community work in order to avoid explanations. Since our policy was to put emphasis on the local community, promoting each mural as the accomplishment of the artist and local sponsor only, we maintained such a low profile that until our first retrospective show few outside

of our immediate circles even knew the group existed or who its members were.

Beginning early in 1972, Bill Walker led an extended struggle for unity and greater definition that proved crucial to our later growth and survival. We decided that all artists were to credit the group, CAF, and the sponsors on each wall and were always to identify themselves as CMG members. Newspaper stories had precipitated this struggle, which also taught us important lessons about the media: to exercise care, but also to take it with a pinch of salt. The media's orientation to events and personalities builds in a tendency to promote "stars," to seek invidious comparisons. A failure to discount for this can easily destroy any group.

At the same time, the limits of our unity were defined by another decision concerning relations with the media. We affirmed, on the one hand, that rights in the murals belong to each artist individually and to the community sponsors and, on the other hand, that permissions for publication of photos should be sought. To enforce this, we began copyrighting our murals in 1972. The purpose of copyright is to check potential abuses, not to hinder the working press. Copyright gives us legal protection to ensure that correct credits are given, and enables us to negotiate with publishers for either contributions toward future murals or for numbers of complimentary copies for distribution in the community. In practice, however, the necessity of contacting each artist separately makes this system difficult to maintain.

Inequalities in Funding

Our stipends have been low compared to "professional" standards—less than half the union rate for house painters—but nonetheless high compared to the flat fees prevalent on the West Coast (excluding the commissioned work such as that of the Los Angeles Fine Arts Squad). Before 1970, Bill Walker and Eugene Eda had worked on a basis of equal shares. However, as soon as the artists were involved in separate projects of varying size, this could no

longer be maintained. Our solution was to provide a per-month or per-week stipend spread over the time necessary to complete each mural. This, of course, raised other problems, since some artists work faster than others and some walls and designs are inherently more difficult. Our solution, under austere conditions, was to try to set a very high standard of productivity (two hundred square feet per week), to demand total commitment (sixty-hour weeks), and to provide stipends only during actual work time and not during preparation time.

Expanding our group in 1972 led to various attempts to stretch funds. As new artists joined, a further inequality was introduced. New members received only half stipend in their first or second years with the group. Since our federal funding had to be matched, this practice of keeping pay low on certain murals made up for the inability to match funds spent on full stipends elsewhere. Thus, the funds to provide full pay for some depended on others getting half pay. At meetings in late spring 1975, these problems were fully aired for the first time. Our new policy will be an equal rate for equal work time for all members, with a pool left over to pay assistants or extend time in special cases. The new policy of equal pay has the support of all of us, but it will demand that all of us work faster, collaborate more, and work much harder at local and group fund raising.

Perspectives

Our early concept of the group as uniting all the active mural forces had to be abandoned as the movement continued to expand and as we reached the practical limits of our own expansion. Nonetheless, there has been a recurrent tendency to overestimate our forces, to spread ourselves thin in attempting to meet the demand for mural-art education from the schools and the general public.

Some members opposed this overextension, putting forward the concept of the group as exemplary rather than comprehensive. They demanded that we concentrate on raising the technical and aes-

thetic level of the group to eliminate the internal division between "old hands" and the beginners. Overall, the last two years have accomplished some of this needed consolidation. Part of this process has been a shift away from spontaneous immediacy and toward muralism as a fine art, an evolution that has mirrored changes in the character of community struggles, especially in the black community. This necessary process of maturation raises new questions concerning the future.

As the gap between veterans and beginners has been closed, the consciousness of the group has evolved, leading some members to call for the writing of a new manifesto. Latin, Asian, and women members have played an important role in these changes. Within our group, men had often dominated discussion. The difficulty of changing traditional male attitudes was probably an element in Kathie Judge's decision to leave the group. Women are now playing leading roles and are actively promoting murals on women's history. Asian and Latin artists have helped broaden the group's perspective on struggles against national oppression, educating the group to see the links between democratic struggles here and anticolonial struggles in Asia and Latin America. An internationalist perspective has begun to replace narrow localisms or the idea of a coalition of nationalisms.

An additional key point emerged in early 1974. At the time, Bill Walker was studying labor history in preparation for his Packinghouse mural (for the Amalgamated Meatcutters Union). José Guerrero and I had been painting at the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America Hall for almost a year (figs. 89 and 92). In a dramatic meeting, we discussed the central importance of the labor struggle and resolved to orient our work more clearly to the working people. Despite most of our activity being in working-class areas, we had conceptualized the unity of the people under the vague term *poor and oppressed*. Now we began to examine the common experience of a *class* (pl. 19).

Walker's leaving the group was a severe blow. At first, it seemed as if he had left a gap that would never be filled. In retrospect, I can

see that it was perhaps a natural progression for him. Since 1972, he had secured his own funding for a series of long-term projects beyond the scope of our summer program. Increasingly, he felt a need to work many months on each mural and to concentrate on his own work. Although he continued his teaching role in the group, he was, I believe, reluctant to immerse himself once again in the emotional internal struggles that would be necessary for our group to survive into the new period.

His departure left many questions unresolved. Walker's moral prestige had seemed to ensure our link to the beginnings of the movement, and to strengthen the CMG commitment to multinational work. In a series of discussions, as well as in our practice, we have strongly reaffirmed our multinational character. To maintain our commitment to the inner city in the face of cutbacks and economic crisis, and, on the other hand, the growing popularity of murals in middle-class areas, we shall have to swim against the tide.

65 John Weber and Celia Radek: design for The Builders. *1975. Chicago.*
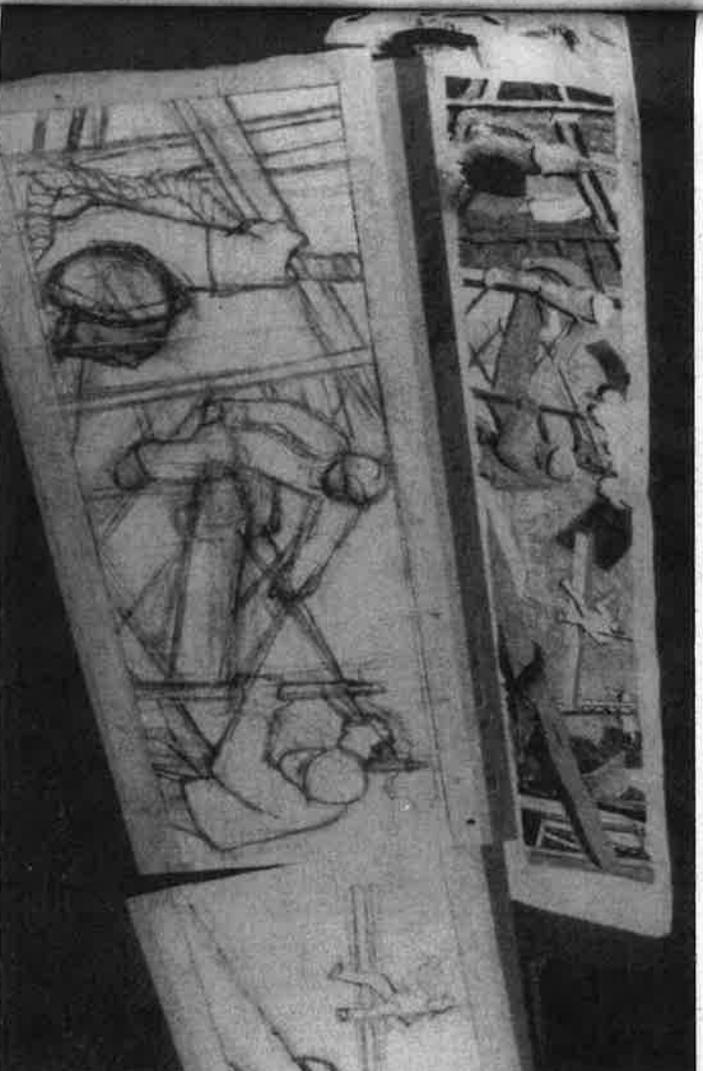
and maintain the greatest clarity of purpose. We have had to rethink the problems of collective leadership. Certainly the establishment of equal pay is a step forward, but it does not by itself guarantee unity. The sharing of administration and the relationship between summer and winter programs, between professional mural painting and facilitative-educational work, will have to be worked out in practice. Hopefully, the new steering committee will play an important role in resolving these problems, but it will only be possible if a higher level of commitment inspires our practical work.

The life of the Chicago Mural Group has progressed through continuous struggle for definition and unity. It is essential that we understand that even leading members may, for whatever combination of reasons, decide that participation in a group—with its intense demands, chronic centrifugal tendencies, and recurrent need to reaffirm basic orientations—no longer meets their own needs for development. A greater danger, I believe, is the possibility that CMG will stabilize itself by becoming a closed guild, unable to elicit and absorb new energies and unable to respond with immediacy to unforeseen events and changing social and political conditions. Art groups are notoriously fragile—few groups last as long as one or two years—but entering its sixth year, CMG is getting a second wind.

7 Cityarts Workshop: Out of the Gallery and into the Streets

Susan Shapiro-Kiok

In 1968 I was given the opportunity to develop a creative-arts workshop in a low-income community on New York's Lower East Side. I accepted this offer with apprehension, because I knew from experience how difficult it would be to make art relevant for this community.

I had first come to the Lower East Side in 1962 as a pottery instructor at the Henry Street Settlement and as coordinator for a community arts project known as "Summer in the City." During this period I made numerous home visits to the families of my art students, which destroyed many of my middle-class concepts about the relevance of art to our lives. I came to see that the primary concern of these people was to provide food, clothing, and shelter for their

Movement in America Since 1960 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), and Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Elaine Brown's memoir of her years in the Black Panther Party, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), is as essential as it is unforgettable.

17. Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 58.

18. Connie Brown and Jane Seitz, "You've Come a Long Way, Baby': Historical Perspectives," in Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Powerful* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 3, 27.

19. John Pitman Weber, "A Perspective on Alternative Public Art" [manuscript dated 1984], p. 7. This essay was translated into Spanish by Luciano Cuadra and published under the title "Perspectiva Sobre Arte Publico Alternativo" in the Nicaraguan journal *Nicarauac* 14 (December 1987): 118–25. I quote, by permission of Mr. Weber, from his original English-language draft.

20. See Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), especially pp. 17, 182–202.

Authors' Note

In writing about the *Wall of Respect* in Chapter 1, "Beginnings," we relied heavily on William Walker's version of the events. It was natural for us to do so: Walker continued in Chicago as an active muralist and a leader. He was the main link between the wall and the artists who became active muralists in the next few years. The OBAC visual artists group dispersed, some of its members helping to form the AfriCobra group, which continues to exhibit. Among the original participants, Wadsworth Jarell and Jeff Donaldson did murals later in Atlanta and Washington, D.C. Inevitably, in such a large group there were disagreements, and other participants tell the story differently, with Walker's role less central and less heroic. See "Upside the Wall: An Artist's Retrospective Look at the Original *Wall of Respect*" in *The People's Art: Black Murals, 1967–1978* (catalogue, The African American Historical and Cultural Museum, Philadelphia, 1986) for one such account, from Jeff Donaldson, or see "*Wall of Respect*: How Chicago Artists Gave Birth to the Ethnic Mural," by Norman Parish III, *Chicago Tribune*, Sunday, August 23, 1992, for statements by Norman Parish Jr., Jeff Donaldson, and Sylvia Abernathy. We also wish to apologize to Norman Parish Jr. for misspelling his name.

Thirty years after its creation, the *Wall of Respect* still looks like the central starting point for the mural movement because of its tremendous reverberation among black artists and in black communities around the country, sparking a real explosion of wall painting activity in 1968. However, as we made clear in *Toward a People's Art*, there were numerous more or less independent starting points for mural activity in

the late 1960s. The ideas of new forms of monumental art in the urban setting, of art as social action, of "community," participatory artwork were "in the air." We nonetheless apologize for the incompleteness of our text.

Our treatment of California beginnings was also flawed. If we had it to do all over again, we would include an entire chapter on the Chicano murals of California and their relationship with the farmworkers' struggle. Fortunately, this material has been thoroughly covered in two other books: *Signs from the Heart* (University of New Mexico Press, 1992), and the catalogue for the exhibition *CARA, Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* at UCLA in 1985. We apologize for overlooking Antonio Bernal's 1968 murals for El Teatro Campesino Cultural Center in Del Rey, as well as murals started in the following year in Sacramento by Esteban Villa and students; in Oakland by Malaquias Montoya, Manuel Hernandez-Trujillo, and David Bradford; and in Los Angeles by the Gonzalez brothers and Judy Baca—all in 1969–70.

We also omitted mention of the political murals done by students at Merritt College, Oakland, by Shirley Triest and David Salgado, 1969, inspired by the "Free Huey" campaign, and the equally politicized murals by Joan X and Wilma Bonnett, the latter one of the very earliest Puerto Rican themes, 1969–70. See Alan Barnett, *Community Murals* (Arts Alliance Press, 1984), Chapter 2, "Invention, 1967–69/70" for a useful account of early mural work. We are pleased to have this chance to correct a few of our lapses.

While a few of the early murals have been maintained and restored, many others have been destroyed or survive only in a deteriorated condition. We hope that the republication of this book will inspire the preservation of those murals from this era that still survive.

Eva Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, James Cockcroft
1998

1. *Twenty-one black artists: Wall of Respect (partial view). 1967; destroyed 1971. Originally at 43rd and Langley, Chicago.*